SCOUTING REPORT Games we play

Success the Al Davis Way

BY ALAN DROOZ

WHETHER they love him or loathe him, nobody involved with or interested in professional football has neutral feelings about Al Davis.

The managing general partner and principal owner of the Los Angeles Raiders is certainly the most controversial team owner west of George Steinbrenner, and mention of his name produces an immediate rush of images and moments in time:

- An intense, pompadoured figure on the sidelines decked out in some combination of his team's colors, silver and black;
- A series of knockdown courtroom battles with the National Football League and Commissioner Pete Rozelle;
- A bombs-away, aggressive style that characterizes Davis's personality as well as his teams;
- A line of famous, last-gasp endings (not always victorious, but always interesting), from the "Heidi" game against the Jets to Pittsburgh's "immaculate reception" in the playoffs to the three-man fumble against the Chargers; and
- A team logo—the familiar one-eyed buccaneer with crossed swords—that many feel is the perfect symbol for the league's most swashbuckling figure (a man once dubbed "Darth Raider").

Yes, Al Davis raises eyebrows in some circles. His us-against-the-world, take-no-prisoners attitude and his aggressive methods—extensive scouting of little-known schools and prospects, gambling on players thought to be washed up or troublesome, and blending savage defense and blitzkrieg offense on the field—have earned Davis tags ranging from genius to renegade, maverick to marauder.

But in Davis's world—the world of professional sports—you can't argue with success. In a business in which the bottom line is victories, the Raiders have the best winning percentage in sports in the last 25 years, edging the Boston Celtics in basketball and the Montreal Canadians in hockey. Davis's teams have appeared in four Super Bowls, winning three.

Davis has immersed himself fully in a culture whose pot of gold is the higher number on the scoreboard, and his only crime is preeminent success.

EVEN WHEN HE WAS a little-used football, basketball, and baseball player at Syracuse, before graduating in 1950 with a degree in English, Davis was a student of strategy and administration. He has often said his dream was not to be a star athlete but to build "the finest organization in professional sports—one that would be the standard bearer by which all others would be measured." He told one interviewer a few years ago, "No one dreamed the dreams I dreamed."

The son of a manufacturer and real estate investor, the 58-year-old Davis has been fascinated by the technical aspects of sports since his Syracuse days. He began scouting and drawing plays during his undergraduate days at SU.

Even then his vision of his future and his persuasive talents—talents that would later convince the Navy to let him play Ensign Napoleon McCallum and entice Bo Jackson to try two sports—were working. Instead of joining the family business, he secured an assistant coaching job at Adelphi College. He also doubled as baseball coach; at age 21, he was reportedly the youngest head coach ever hired by a U.S. college.

When Davis was drafted in 1952, he became head coach of an Army post football team that lost only two games in two years, and it's said that he developed a talent for securing college and professional players who had been drafted. When he was discharged in 1954, he became a scout for Weeb Ewbank and the Baltimore Colts, and a year later he became the line coach and chief recruiter for the Citadel.

Davis came to California to stay in 1957 when he was hired as line coach for the University of Southern California, where some of his newfangled blocking techniques and his re-

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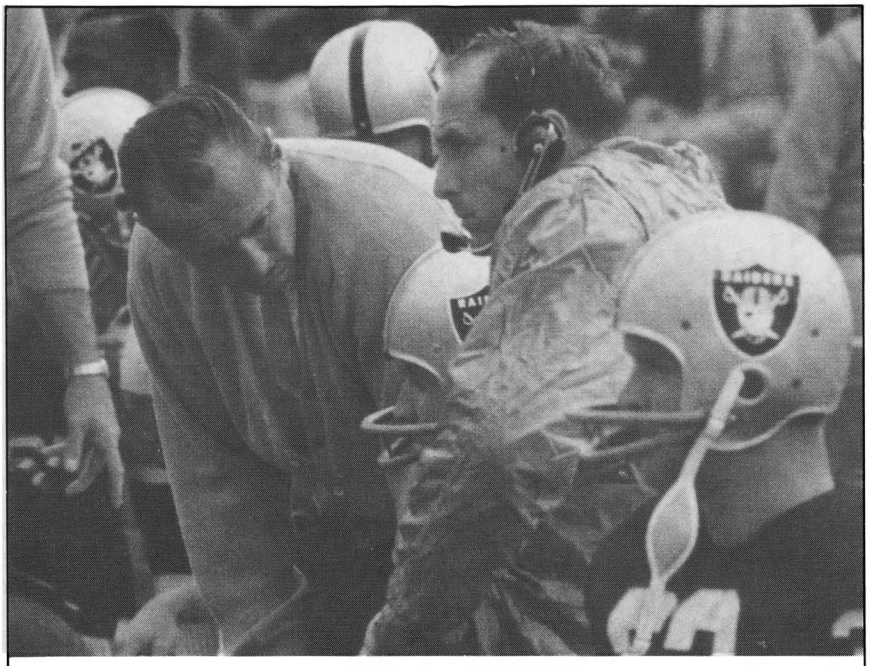
Al Davis is no one's Mr. Congeniality, but he is arguably the most successful owner/manager in all of professional sports.

ALAN DROOZ *is a sports-writer with the* Los Angeles Times. *He graduated from SU in 1973, majoring in journalism and English.*

cruiting ability helped put USC on the road to the 1962 national championship. But when fellow assistant John McKay was named head coach in 1960, Davis left USC for an assistant's job with the Los Angeles Chargers, of the fledgling American Football League (AFL). With the Chargers, who soon moved to San Diego, Davis got to develop his offensive schemes under Sid Gillman, a noted offensive innovator.

In 1962, as the Chargers were atop the young league, Gillman made a prophetic statement: "There isn't a doubt in Al Davis's mind right now he's the smartest guy in the game. He isn't, but he will be pretty damn soon."



Davis (left) began with the Raiders in 1963 as head coach.

John Johnson, a former scout for Davis with the Chargers, said recently, "He was very knowledgeable, and he really worked at his job. He doesn't have hours. He works night and day. The way he was as a coach is the way he is as an owner. I think he's the most knowledgeable man in football. He always seems to know something nobody else knows."

BEFORE THE 1963 season Davis was named head coach of the Oakland Raiders, who had lost 33 of the first 42 games of their existence. He revamped the roster. He introduced a long-bomb offense and bump-and-run defense. He made more extensive use of the game film than any other coach. He changed the team colors to silver and black and added the team's pirate logo and its motto, "Pride and Poise." His players found him obsessive but completely loyal, a man who would get his team whatever it needed to win. The Raiders went 10–4 in his first season; Davis was named Coach of the Year.

When the AFL began a skirmish with the established National Football League for college talent, Davis was selected the AFL's commissioner. His aggressive tactics in escalating the price war for talent helped force the merger of the two leagues in a matter of months.

After the merger, Davis returned to the Raiders as managing general partner; he has since acquired principal ownership of the team. He maintains a hands-on approach as an owner. Los Angeles *Herald-Examiner* columnist Mel Durslag, perhaps Davis's best friend in the southern California media, says that to this day Davis watches game films every night. He has won Super Bowls by taking chances on supposedly over-the-hill veterans like Jim Plunkett and Lyle Alzado, and his evaluation of unknown college talent is legendary. His is the only team that doesn't take part in the NFL scouting combine.

But for most of this decade Davis's image has been that of the man who faced down Pete Rozelle. Having failed to get improvements for Oakland Coliseum, Davis sought greener pastures and looked toward Los Angeles, which the Rams had vacated for nearby Anaheim. The league said he couldn't move. The city of Oakland filed an eminent-domain claim on the team.

So Davis took on the NFL, and a series of lawsuits followed. Oakland fans took to calling his team the Traitors. Undaunted as usual, Davis won this fight as well and, after a long series of legal battles, moved the team to Los Angeles in 1982.

Davis told an interviewer then, "I just decided that someone had to take them on, that they were just a little too powerful for their own good."

Durslag explains, "It started out as a simple case of Al vs. Rozelle. Al isn't a guy you put in a corner like a child and tell him to stay. He's more excited by the combat than the court stuff."

Indeed, Davis himself has long enjoyed playing up the street-fighter image that both he and his team maintain. He has often told interviewers, "I'd rather be feared than respected." His most often used verb is *dominate,* and he refers to football as a "paramilitary environment."

In 1981 he told *The New York Times,* "The primary thing is winning. Outside of birth, life, and death, I would rank power in a classification second to winning. . . . I don't deny that I want to dominate my environment. I admit it, but I just think that's part of America. I have a right to control my destiny as long as I don't hurt anybody else."

THE LAWSUITS, COUpled with Davis's natural public reticence, have made him nearly unapproachable by the media in Los Angeles, augmenting Davis's public image as something of a curmudgeon.

But those close to him say that image is far from the reality. He is admittedly not a socializer—the Raiders may have gone Hollywood, but not their owner. Still, Davis has plenty of friends. In fact, Davis has been asked by five former players to introduce them at Football Hall of Fame inductions—more than any other individual in professional football. Earlier this summer Davis was one of the pallbearers and eulogists at the funeral of Dodgers coach Don McMahon, a former high school teammate at Erasmus Hall in Brooklyn.

When the Carrier Dome was being built, Davis contributed (the home locker room is named in his honor), and he was honored as an Orange Letterman of Distinction in 1985.

Friends say that behind the scenes he is a humanitarian who has gone to great lengths for sick friends, players, and family. When his wife, Carolee, fell into a coma a few years ago, he stayed by her bedside and talked coaxingly to her, nearly nonstop, for three weeks. She has since recovered.

Durslag says that side of Davis has always been there, but on Davis's terms. "Al gives to charities," he says, "but not the charities the NFL pushes. He's partial to health issues. He gives to hospitals and clinics."

Most recently, Davis, angered by the Los Angeles Coliseum commissioner's refusal to provide promised improvements, struck a sudden deal with the tiny suburban hamlet of Irwindale to build a stadium and practice complex for the Raiders. The Coliseum Commission threatened to sue, and the Raiders threatened to countersue, with a claim of $18 million. "Brooklyn Al" had struck again, unexpectedly and at the jugular.

Despite all the legal hassles, all the headlines, all the stories, Davis has maintained his focus on winning football games. He remains the only individual in professional football to serve as assistant coach, head coach, commissioner, general manager, and principal owner. When he moved to Los Angeles, he added "Commitment to Excellence" to the team's mottoes. But his most familiar watchwords were, and remain, "Just win, baby."

Through it all, Davis has done just that.